

Washington Island offers history, 'lawyer fish' and 10,000 shots of Angostura Bitters



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WASHINGTON ISLAND, Wis. – Where there's a will, there's a way – around Prohibition. And Tom Nelsen possessed both.



The Stavkirk, or "Church of Staves," was built by islanders in the late 1990s. Photo by Fred Granger .

A Danish immigrant living on Washington Island, a remote spot of land just north of Wisconsin's Door County, he built Nelsen's Hall in 1899. When Prohibition began, he got himself a pharmacist's license and convinced the feds that he was dispensing bitters as a stomach tonic. His bar remained open – where he dutifully drank a pint of Angostura Bitters each and every day until he died at 90.

To this day, Nelsen's is still dispensing bitters, but with an added twist. Guests are invited to join The Bitters Club. To accomplish the feat, each must down a shot of Angostura at Nelsen's. An official witness, typically owner Robin Ditello, then wets her thumb in the emptied shot glass and transfers her print to a Bitters Club membership card, making it official with the date and her signature.

Nelsen's sells close to 10,000 shots each year, mostly to out-of-towners who seek membership in the not-very-exclusive club.

Just up the street is the K.K. Fiske Restaurant, built in 1860. Today it's known as the home of the Washington Island fish boil. Lake Michigan whitefish and small red potatoes are cooked outside over an open fire, much like it was done by Scandinavian settlers in the 19th century. Fish oils rise to the surface of the boiling water, and when the fish and potatoes are cooked, the boiler throws kerosene on the fire to cause a boilover, spilling the oils over the side of the pot.

Fiske's is also the home of the lawyer, in season. It's a freshwater fish officially called the burbot, but it's more commonly referred to as a lawyer because of its unusual anatomy, with its heart located in its ... ah ... derriere.

It's so popular that the restaurant is considering putting up a motel-style "yes/no" neon sign to announce its availability.

No bitters here. Instead, diners are apt to down a new Island Wheat with their meals.

A couple years ago, in a turnaround of the island's sagging agricultural economy, the Washington Hotel, Restaurant & Culinary School was born. Among its specialties are breads made from wheat grown on the island. Too much wheat was grown that first year, however – 36 tons too much. So the farmers took it to the Capital Brewery near Madison, and Island Wheat ale was born. The wheat also goes to make Death's Door vodka and gin.

The plan is just the latest in a long history of island survival, where Scandinavian immigrants settled in the 1800s. Flags flying in the entrance to the harbor represent the countries from which those immigrants came – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. The island is the first Icelandic settlement in America.

"They came to fish and farm," said Ed Livingston, tour guide aboard the Cherry Train trolley. "They were excellent in every aspect of farming. At one time we produced more potatoes than any other community in the state of Wisconsin. We also had the largest commercial fishing fleet of roughly 1,000 men and 400 boats."

Today tourism is the principal industry on the island, where the population is around 700. The gem of the island may well be the Stavkirke, or "Church of Staves," belonging to Trinity Lutheran Church.

"This tells you more about us than any other historic site on the island," said Livingston.

In the 1100s Saint Olaf of Norway mandated that Christianity would be followed.

"That meant these rough Vikings had to accept this new symbol called the cross of Jesus," said Livingston.

"They were slow to accept it because they were pagan worshippers. They worshipped dragons, snakes, everything imaginable. They eventually accepted Christianity, and about 800 of these little churches sprang up around Norway. Today there are 26 left."

Modeled after the 1150 Borgund stavkirke in Laerdal, Norway, the island's church was built inside a huge barn by volunteers, who knew they'd be working during inclement weather. When the church was done, they took the barn down. Its design blends Christianity with old Norse traditions and follows the lines of a Viking ship.

"There are crosses everywhere," said Livingston. "At the top of the church you'll see long-snouted creatures sticking out. Those are the dragons, and that represents the former worshipping of the pagan gods. It's said that when Jesus entered the church, the pagan gods flew out. So they're on the top forever and ever."

The island's history is presented through a variety of eclectic items at Jens Jacobsen's Museum. At the Jackson Harbor Maritime Museum, in two former fishing sheds, the focus is on the water – the fishing industry, Coast Guard and shipwrecks.

Washington Island is 6 miles off the northern tip of Door County, a slender strip of land some 75 miles long between the bay of Green Bay and Lake Michigan. Getting there by year-round ferry takes about 30 minutes as it passes through Death's Door, known for choppy seas and converging winds. The French called it "Porte des Morts" because of a loss of Native American lives during a storm. It is also the site of a number of 19th-century shipwrecks. Today's modern navigation systems make the passage much safer, although winter crossings can be challenging when there are high winds and moving ice.

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